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ABSTRACT

The growing demand for guidance on teaching about the world religions in U.S. high schools and colleges over the past few years prompted the Foreign Policy Research Institute (FPRI) to devote its seventh annual History Institute, April 2001, to exploring the topic. The institute brought together university faculty and 44 high school teachers from 16 states to discuss the best recent scholarship on world religions and how that scholarship can be used the classroom. FPRI has long recognized the key role that religion plays in international affairs. Recent headlines on terrorism and conflict in the Middle East underline the point. A world religion is one with a global following not restricted to members of a particular society, nation, or culture. By that definition, there are three world religions today: (1) Christianity; (2) Islam; and (3) Buddhism. The institute attendees did not question whether religious studies belonged in the curriculum but rather how it should be presented as a vital part of the humanities. The high school teachers agreed that studying about world religions is important to understanding so many other subjects in the curriculum and addresses fundamental questions that students ask regarding the meaning of life. The group concluded that developing an effective synthesis for the classroom remains the key challenge for teaching about world religions. (BT)

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FOOTNOTES

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TEACHING WORLD RELIGIONS: A REPORT OF FPRI'S HISTORY INSTITUTE FOR TEACHERS

by William Anthony Hay, Rapporteur

The growing demand for guidance on teaching world religions in American high schools and colleges over the past few years prompted FPRI to devote its seventh annual History Institute in April 2001 to the subject. Our weekend conference brought noted university faculty in the field together with 44 high school teachers from 16 states to discuss the best recent scholarship on religion and how it can be applied to the classroom. The Philadelphia Inquirer covered the event in its Sunday, May 6, 2001 edition.

FPRI has long recognized the key role that religion plays in international affairs, and recent headlines on terrorism and conflict in the Middle East underline the point. Given the impact of religion on world politics today, it is surprising how little about the subject is taught in American schools.

More than half of all Americans attend a place of worship at least once a month, and over 80% identify themselves as Christian. Most high school and college students, therefore, come from some religious tradition held by their family or social community. Since religion is practiced rather than studied, classroom teachers often find that students lack a sophisticated understanding of the history and doctrines underpinning their own faith, let alone other religions. These circumstances invite schools and colleges to address the challenge of introducing students to the rich experience of world religions.

A world religion is one with a global following not restricted to members of a particular society, nation, or culture. By that definition there are today three world religions: Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism. There have been others in the past which have disappeared, such as the Manichaean religion that spread from Syria to China in the first millennium CE. Some are disputed cases, such as Hinduism, which can be found far beyond the borders of India, though typically in areas that were culturally Indianized. Religions that have significantly influenced social norms and ethical or political ideas and practices in more than one society can also be defined as world religions. By this definition, Judaism is a world religion through its influence on Christianity, Islam, and western social and political values.

The importance of religion to history, literature, political philosophy, and other disciplines make it an essential part of the liberal curriculum. Societies cannot be understood without considering their systems of beliefs, and comparative study of those beliefs draws attention to common ethical values shared across cultures despite the very different ways in which they are expressed. Religion has shaped, for example, Western history from the creation of the European West in the Middle Ages to the sixteenth-century Reformation, and later encounters between civilizations during the Age of Exploration. So the question is not whether religious studies belongs in the curriculum, but how to present it effectively as a vital part of the humanities.

DISCIPLINING RELIGION?

Paul Griffiths of the University of Illinois at Chicago opened the conference by addressing the questions of what religion is and how it can be taught. The word "religion" as used today embodies a complex and sometimes incoherent set of ideas with a relatively short history. St. Augustine used the Latin "religio" to describe those patterns of action by which people turn themselves toward God in homage and praise. But the concept of religion itself was not of great importance either to the philosophers and theologians of late antiquity or to medieval Christians. Europeans only encountered "other religions" in the sixteenth century. The modern understanding of religion as a general concept of which there are many particular instances came later with the Protestant Reformation and European encounters with other cultures. Different forms of worship and the sacred texts that accompanied them were seen as the religions of other cultures, just as Christianity, in its various forms, was the religion of Europe. But while there are many religions, Europeans thought only one--their own branch of Christianity--was true. All other forms could be called religion only insofar as they approached that model. Thus, the variegated and complex understanding of religion Westerners now have derives largely from this peculiarly European history and the intellectual work that emerged from it.

Part of this understanding involves the academic discipline of religion itself. Religious studies emerged in Western universities in self-conscious opposition to theology or the self-understanding of a given church, but it never escaped the sense that "religion" means faiths like Christianity. Attempts to extricate the subject from this idea have failed to be intellectually useful or produce anything but confusion. Religion, it is now agreed, can be studied only within a theological framework or under other disciplines like history, literary studies or anthropology. How then can it be taught?

Griffiths offers two answers based on the distinction between teaching someone how to be religious and teaching them about religion. Teaching someone how to be religious is

always about particularities; it teaches them to behave in a particular way as part of a specific religion. Teaching about religions, like teaching about other complex social phenomena such as war or the family, involves communicating information about the history, sociology, and cultural meaning of the subject. This approach integrates religion across the curriculum, since teaching so many things from Chaucer or Shakespeare to the history of the American civil rights movement involve religion, and avoids the tensions created by categorizing things as religious. Griffith closed with a simple, but paradoxical thought: we pay far less educational concern than we should to the religious aspects of life, and the main reason for that neglect may be that we think of them as religious.

TEACHING RELIGION IN A NOT ENTIRELY SECULAR CULTURE

If religion fits awkwardly into the framework of an academic discipline, what place does it hold in the curriculum of public and other non-sectarian schools? Warren Nord of the University of North Carolina argued that the impact and vitality of so many religious traditions demand that a liberal education include them. But how can religion be taught without violating the separation of church and state or offending sensibilities? Nord said that the only way is to be fair to the alternatives. In presenting their material, teachers must allow religions to speak for themselves through primary sources. Understanding the many dimensions of religion demands an approach that moves beyond the emphasis on "basic teachings" that works best with Christianity and Islam. Other faiths privilege ritual, community, and personal experience over a canon of belief. Neutrality requires that public schools not promote or privilege any one religion over the others.

Nord outlined a new consensus on the role of religion in public education. A variety of religious, educational, and civil liberties groups agree on three points: (1) it is constitutional to teach about religion in public schools; (2) religion must be approached neutrally without proselytizing; and (3) learning about religion is important. Challenges remain in translating this consensus into the classroom on a national level, but keeping the task in mind will draw us closer to a solution.

THE GREAT MONOTHEISTIC FAITHS

Most American students are at least nominally Christians or familiar with the basics of Christian history and teaching. The University of Pennsylvania's Ann Matter discussed how this familiarity raises questions involving Christianity's self-understanding and self-definition.

Christianity, she notes, grew up in the expectation of an impending apocalypse; it was the true religion because it was to be the last one. Jesus explicitly instructed his followers to "make disciples of all nations," baptizing them and teaching them to observe Christ's commands (Matthew 28:19-20) Believers thought their faith should be spread to the far corners of the earth, and a mission born in expectation of the end became absolute on earth. The conversion of the Emperor Constantine in the 4th century made Christianity coterminous with the Roman empire. Christianity thus absorbed all sorts of peoples and religious traditions within the empire and the neighboring regions. Conflict with Judaism and Islam shaped how Christians defined their faith. Matter argued that the best way of teaching Christianity is to examine its relationship with other religious traditions, particularly those that resisted its appeal.

Tensions between Christianity and other faiths appear in today's classrooms as well as historically. Christians are instructed to bring others to their faith, but others can see that imperative as prejudice against them. Christian resentment towards Jews who rejected the Gospel echoes into today's discussions of religion in secular universities. Can one teach Christianity without appearing to preach?

A Christian student in Matter's course at Penn remarked that "the trouble with Christianity is that is sometimes very hard to tell the difference between proselytizing and witnessing." His point cuts to the distinction between teaching and teaching about religion. Literature, music, and art provide evidence of Christian self-understanding, and Matter explored how these media can be used in the classroom to teach Christianity without triumphalism.

Peter Ochs from the University of Virginia began his discussion of Judaism with Klezmer music and a question: why do the Jews sing, dance and celebrate life when the history they narrate is so full of suffering? A basic explanation of Judaism begins with the three pillars of God, Torah, and Israel, but it might be more helpful to teach about the contradictions found in Judaism. It is those ambiguities that provide windows onto the deeper teachings of Judaism and how they are lived.

Much of the content of Jewish religion is the narrative through which the people properly called *b'nai Yisrael*, "the Children of Israel," remembers its own history. The Biblical story of Exodus is the defining narrative of Israel's history: how the children of Jacob went down to Egypt in a time of famine, were enslaved by Pharaoh, freed by God and delivered over forty years to the Promised Land of Canaan which would become *eretz yisrael*, the official homeland of the Jews. Caanan is believed to be a holy land that gives peace only to those who are faithful to the Creator, whose will is disclosed in the Torah or teachings that God gave through Moses and the prophets. Torah refers not just to what is written explicitly in the Bible; it includes all the teachings of the sages that clarify what it means to live out the written Torah and imitate God in acts of daily life.

Stories of suffering abound in scripture, even before the Roman destruction of the Temple, the diaspora, pogroms and finally the Shoah (Holocaust), and much of Judaism is devoted to reflections on living with suffering. Ochs cited Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, and Kings, along with the Amos and Hosea, as examples of the theme that Israel suffers when it fails to live up to the high standards God sets for it. Students should be taught how the people of Israel interpreted their suffering as a sign of divine anger and in response sought to live a more righteous way of life.

Judaism is nonetheless a religion of life, and much of Jewish life is celebratory and focused on family and community. Ochs highlighted the contradiction between suffering and celebration, and what he described as a pattern of ironies offers a way to teach Judaism.

For instance, Judaism is a religion of one God, distant and all powerful, yet it also involves intimate dialogue with God. How can God be both far--a wholly and Holy other--and yet near enough for remarkable freedom in His relationship with students of the Torah? Another irony lies in the fact that Jews consider themselves a holy people set apart from the world by strict observance of Jewish law and Torah but are also among the world's most cosmopolitan people. Finally, how does the Judaism of practical, worldly ethics go along with the Judaism of close textual study of Torah and Talmud? Exploring these questions offers a useful means of teaching about Judaism.

Abdul Aziz Sachedina from the University of Virginia addressed the difficulties of teaching about Islam in the face of prevalent stereotypes along with popular images of Arabs, Iranians and Muslims. The treatment of religion in American culture also creates a problem in understanding cultures that lack fundamental conceptual distinctions between "church" and "state" or "religious" and "secular." Sachedina offered a comparative methodology for teaching Islam with a cautious approach to the internal integrity of cultures represented under what we generally call "Islam." Teachers must distinguish between Islam as a religious tradition with a set of beliefs, practices, and attitudes; Islam as a cultural tradition that provides important values used as benchmarks of Muslim lifestyle; and Islam as a civilization that created societies, political institutions and a rich legacy of art and literature. These distinctions make it easier to explain political anomalies that require an objective and careful response. Sachedina stressed the use of primary sources to engage Islam in the classroom and illustrated his presentation with images from Islamic art, particularly calligraphy, and material culture.

The *Qur'an* (meaning recitation) and the codified teachings and commentaries from the Prophet Muhammad known as the Sunnah comprised the foundational sources of Islam. Sachedina outlined five pillars of faith that cover both individual behavior and the community: Shahada, bearing witness to the oneness of God and the prophethood of Muhammad; Salat, the five times of daily worship; Sawm, the dawn to dusk fasting during the month of Ramadan; Zakat the giving of alms; Haji, the pilgrimage to Mecca . Islam's religious goals involve the perfection of self to reflect divine nature and attaining freedom of the will through submission to God's will. Faith provides a wholeness and security while religion is the source of connectedness in human relationships that lie at the center of Islamic ethics. Reason and revelation complement each other in providing ethical guidance, though no distinction exists between secular and religious.

BUDDHISM AND HINDUISM

William LaFleur from the University of Pennsylvania described Buddhism as a religion quite different from what most American students expect in studying a religion. God, at least as defined in the monotheistic faiths, has no great role in a full Buddhist religious and ethical life. Nevertheless, Buddhists perform solemn rituals, think of their lives as spiritual, and conceive of their religious practice as the basis of morality. Another interesting difference is that suffering, not sin, presents Buddhists with the major problem of human existence. Suffering includes that brought by one's own greed, hatred, envy, and failure to bring tranquility to one's life through meditation.

The scriptures of Buddhism, great in their numbers, are largely philosophical guides to meditation. Some represent Buddha explaining the origins of suffering and the way to tranquility, while others tell of how moral living results in good karma and rewards whereas immorality leads to the opposite. However, Buddhist scriptures do not portray reality as a great struggle between good and evil, nor do they offer any theory of how the world came into being. Thus, Buddhism lacks the concept of "sacred history" seen in other faiths.

Perhaps, LaFleur suggests, Buddhism is what the philosopher A.N. Whitehead called "religion at a low temperature." This concept raises interesting questions for the classroom, not least being whether religion need be defined by a deity. Buddhism readily coexists with other faiths, and nowhere is this more clear than in the edicts of Asoka (274-232 BCE), the most famous of Buddhist rulers, who declared that "the faiths of others all deserve to be honored for one reason or another." The same spirit of mutual respect was present later in China and Japan when what was called the complementary "unity of the three creeds" (Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism) was valued. Many people, especially in East Asia, will not think of themselves as exclusively Buddhist. There is in fact a sense that the study of other religions is a religious duty for Buddhists.

Studying Hinduism, the religion of approximately one-sixth of the world's population, also forces students to rethink their understanding of religion. Guy Welbon from the University of Pennsylvania began his discussion of Hinduism by noting its complexity and lack of familiar organizational structures. No single holy book commands attention as authoritative. Practices vary widely among Hindus, and the complexity of ideas and beliefs is equally striking: some Hindus are ardent theists dedicated to a single god or goddess, while others dedicate themselves to a principle that transcends all forms including gods. Even among theists there are virtually uncountable denominations each dedicated to a different divinity. Accordingly, teachers should avoid thinking of any single Hinduism realized in this or that particular Hindu movement.

Welbon made the case that the development of Hinduism shows an aggregation of features that invites an archeological approach. One might consider five strata or moments around which to structure an overview of Hinduism. Before any recognizable Hinduism there was "Vedism," a religion centered on the Vedas, the oldest surviving religious literature in an Indo-European language. *Veda*, or "knowledge," celebrated a world of gods and powers and humans ordered by mutual responsibility, action, and fidelity to obligations. Vedism centered on ritual acts held equivalent to those acts or *karmas* that first created the world. India's religions turned inward by the middle of the first millennium BCE with challenges to Vedism's central values summarized as *nasitka* or rejections. Heroes like Gautama the Buddha, Mahavira, and the Jain Tirthamkara urged the renunciation of everyday life and ordinary ambition to achieve true freedom. The release they taught involved disciplined action (*yoga*) that included regimens of concentration and meditation to achieve new awareness and states of being. The very historicity of these teachers added a new element to Indian religion, as did their subordinating themselves to their teaching.

Bhakti, or devotion as a conscious declaration of loyalty, provides a third stratum of Hinduism that dissolves the earlier dilemma between action in the world and renunciation of it by acting dutifully to offer the fruits of action to a chosen divinity. *Bhakti* created a personal monotheism out of a social polytheism. It dates from shortly before the common era and is seen in the *Svetasvatara Upanisad* and *Bhagavadgita*. The institutions of what is described as classical Hinduism crystallized around *bhakti* as Vedism declined.

Welbon outlined the final two strata as *mleccha*, or the gradual accommodation of various elements from outside the Hindu tradition, and the nineteenth century consolidation of earlier practices into the Hinduism prominent today. Some outside elements were indigenous but non-Sanskrit products of South Asia, but others include Muslim influences in Arabic, Persian and Turkish from the eighth century and European influences, particularly British ones, from the late sixteenth century. Neo-Hinduism derived from nineteenth-century reactions to British efforts to understand and classify Hinduism. Foreign observers and Indians alike

systematically explored the historical extent and continuity of Hindu traditions, and Hinduism emerged as a complex religion with a history. Although not the sole strand of contemporary Hinduism, the results of these nineteenth-century encounters consolidated it as a religion. In a significant sense, Welbon notes, Hinduism became a religion in the act of becoming a world religion.

Hinduism, Welbon concludes, still challenges conventional understandings of what constitutes a religion. It remains difficult to comprehend more than a minority of Hindus by a common denominator of beliefs. Indeed, Hindu traditions champion orthopraxy rather than orthodoxy--not believing the right thing, but doing the right thing and doing it in the right way. Hinduism is unique precisely in its processula dynamism rather than a fixed set of dogmas and practices. It is a pluralistic system. Custom, art, and other aspects of material culture thus provide a window onto Hinduism.

CONCLUSIONS

Religion comprehends a wide range of phenomena that students will find familiar to varying degrees, and several specific points follow. Religions must be understood on their own terms, and that requires viewing them in social context and not simply as an easily memorized formula of beliefs. Primary sources are important in allowing each tradition to speak for itself. Images from art or material culture as well as rituals themselves provide another important teaching tool that helps break what one participant called the "tyranny of the textbook."

The high school teachers present agreed that religion is important to understanding so many other subjects in the curriculum and that it also addresses fundamental questions students ask about the meaning of life. Teachers consider themselves free to discuss religion without sparking controversy, but face the problem of already having to cover too much material. Presenting religious thought as an alternative interpretation provides one solution to this dilemma. Other teachers have developed special courses on topics like religion and ethnic conflict. Although there is little pressure from parents or administrators to address religion in the classroom, one teacher said that in his experience it was found to be integral and important. The group concluded that developing an effective synthesis for the classroom remains the key challenge for teaching world religions.

William Anthony Hay is executive director of FPRI's Center for the Study of America and the West.

FPRI's History Academy is chaired by Pulitzer Prizewinning historian Walter A. McDougall. Previous history weekends for teachers covered: Teaching the Vietnam War (keynoted by George Herring); Multiculturalism in World History (keynoted by William McNeill); The Cold War Revisited (keynoted by John Lewis Gaddis); Two Hundred Years of American Foreign Policy (keynoted by Walter McDougall); Teaching History: How and Why (keynoted by Gordon Wood); and America and the Idea of the West (keynoted by William McNeill). Next year's History Institutes will focus on "Teaching Geography and Geopolitics," to be held April 20-21, 2002, and "Teaching about Japan (date to be announced). If you are a high school teacher and would like to participate in the history weekends, or if you are not a teacher but would like to support professional development programs such as these, contact Alan Luxenberg at fpri@fpri.org or call 215-732-3774, ext. 105.

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